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International Politics and Film: Space, Vision, Power, by Sean Carter and Klaus Dodds. Wallflower, 2014, 126 pp.

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Once, there were comparatively few books that focused on the relationship between international politics and film. Happily, this is no longer the case. Sean Carter and Klaus Dodd's *International Politics and Film: Space, Vision, Power* is an exciting addition to the growing body of literature on the political ontology of art and aesthetics. As scholars in geopolitics and human geography, their love for film is evident, as is their command of the interdisciplinary literature. Despite its brevity, this well-argued and thought-provoking book covers an impressive 102 films from around the world, albeit some in far greater detail than others. Still, despite its compactness, it is a satisfying read that will undoubtedly attract casual readers unfamiliar with scholarship in either discipline but with enough substance to delight specialists in both film and international relations.

Carter and Dodds successfully bring international relations (IR) and critical geopolitics into closer alignment with visual studies in general and film studies in particular. Their thesis is simple: first, the traditional emphasis of IR on macro-level players such as heads of state, diplomats, the intelligence community, and intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations have created a biased perception of what constitutes the practice of international politics. Second, this bias is problematic because concepts such as the state and the homeland, amongst others, are abstract entities whose ontological statuses do not exist apart from the practices of people. It is ordinary people who, in conjunction with state officials, enact the practices necessary for things like borders to exist and who contribute to their sociocultural meanings, which are continually subject to negotiation and renegotiation. Third, given the role mundane practices play in international political norms, films exert a special power given their relationship to popular culture. Films help "to create understandings of who we think we are, how we regard other people and countries and the nature of group or societal membership" (10) and they do so through the performativity of international politics, the spatialisation of political practice, and through the role of the visual (6).

Citing the work of geographer Luiza Bialasiewicz et al., the authors emphasise that, aside from law, economics, politics and military strategies, states owe their existence to a wide range of discursive practices that include "cultural debates about normal social behaviour, including "[t]he meanings, identities, social relations and political assemblages [...] made or represented in the name of a particular state but that state does not pre-exist those performances" (6). Thus, far from

merely reflecting the norms, values, and practices found in the international political arena, films actually help constitute the political world (6).

It is often said that "art imitates life"; that, in some Platonic fashion, films imperfectly mimic the "actual" interplay between states. However, as the authors convincingly argue, the converse is often the case. Long before the advent of television and motion pictures, politics has always been as much about appearance as anything else. After all, the Third Reich took its pageantry and choreographed standard-bearing from the ancient Romans. With a cinematic eye, the Nazis also used orchestras comprised of Jewish death camp prisoners tasked not only with performing during official ceremonies, but also for purposes of providing "incidental and background music for public punishments and executions" (Fackler). As the authors point out, other states have also been influenced by cinema when seeking to project a particular public image; the book features photographs comparing President George W. Bush's announcement of the cessation of US combat operations in Afghanistan—after emerging from a fighter plane dressed in a flight suit, helmet in hand—to the "generic qualities" of techno-thriller films, such as the popular *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1985) (2). Hence, from a bare chested-horseback-riding Vladimir Putin to the 1984 re-election ad "It's Morning in America" for US President Ronald Reagan, a former Hollywood actor ("Presidential Ad"), political leaders of all stripes often stage public appearances according to popular cinematic tropes.

This practice is not necessarily as cynical as it might seem. Screenings of *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966) were arranged for US personnel serving in Iraq by the Pentagon as a (clearly unheeded) warning of what might happen as a result of foreign occupation (14). Indeed, according to the State Department, "[f]ilm and television have long been mechanisms for promoting US policy priorities and nurturing cross-cultural understanding" ("Showing Films"). Film screenings are routinely offered for diplomatic staff, White House cabinet members and visiting foreign dignitaries. Given the importance of the film industry to the US economy it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the State Department, through its embassies in forty countries, provides "screenings, discussions and workshops in all areas related to film including production, writing, animation, distribution, and financing" ("American Film"). One suspects that other governments engage in similar efforts. In other words, state officials are just as acculturated to filmic understandings of international space as anyone else. The fact that films themselves can spark international crises such as the Kazakh government's reaction to the film *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006) or the Egyptian government's objection to the titular character being played by an African American actor in the US made-for-television drama *Sadat* (Richard Michaels, 1983) lends credence to the argument that film is deeply incorporated into political thinking and behavior (Miller).

Furthermore, as cited by the authors, political scientist Cynthia Weber points out that IR theorists themselves "depend upon certain narratives and images to sustain particular understandings of states and the international system" including, ostensibly, narratives taken from and sustained by popular media such as film, thus rejecting the notion that states and the international system are pregiven (5). Narratives are important. Indeed, many scholars have pointed out how the traditional American view of itself, which developed out of its colonial frontier past with its accompanying narratives of white-hatted cowboys attempting to establish order in a "savage" state of nature, has deeply informed its foreign policy, perhaps most tragically in the case

of its diplomatic and military intervention into Vietnam, as well as the Iraq War and the ongoing War on Terror.

As Carter and Dodds demonstrate, "our sense of international politics is to be found in a host of sites and settings, as well as relationships, taking in the home, the airport, the street, the border-crossing, hidden and secretive places [...] and other mundane spaces" (103). Providing a survey of border and "road block" films in the American, Israeli-Palestinian, and Pakistani film traditions, before delving into *The Terminal* (Steven Spielberg, 2004), *Yadon ilaheyya* (*Divine Intervention*, Elia Suleiman, 2002), and *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), the authors begin their film analysis by examining borders, checkpoints, and geographical designations of sovereignty, which are paradoxical spaces consisting of both the interaction and separation between two sovereign entities. In doing so, they focus on the ways in which films depict the paradox of all borders, which is that, on the one hand, a state's sovereignty rests upon its ability to control its territory and borders and, on the other, that capitalism requires money, goods, and people to flow freely across any such demarcations (21–22). At the macro level, treaties form the basis for all such exchanges. However, at the micro level, it is individuals who embody the legalistic and social interactions that take place within these spaces. In other words, borders are amongst those abstract entities, like governments, money, property, and marriages, that require widespread human agreement in order to exist (Searle 1). However, the function of any of those abstractions require us to act as if they were real. Where disagreement arises out of those interactions, there exists the possibility of subversion and transformation. Borders are thus sites of conflict and negotiation (22). Rather than a fixed line they mark "a terrain of contestation, management, control, resistance, power, technology and subversion" (39). Their demarcation and management require human bodies to visually perform their existence. This chapter abounds with absurdities. The protagonist in *The Terminal* finds his visa to enter the US revoked because of a *coup d'état* in his home country. As a result, he must live in an American airport, an example of spatialised political practice, for nine months while he waits for the international community to recognise the new state. Seemingly fantastical, the film is actually loosely based on a true story (Berkzeller). Such written agreements are between governments but require embodied individual actors to enact them and give them life. However, it is the absence of the abstract agreement (due to the dissolution of the state issuing his passport) that will determine the fate of its individual holder in the eyes of the customs agents who are tasked with recognising the validity of the traveller's request.

Divine Intervention depicts the conflicting views of a checkpoint separating Palestinians from Israelis and their differential treatment when crossing back and forth. Israelis enjoy the freedom to cross, while Palestinians are subject to degrading treatment and view the checkpoint as yet another manifestation of foreign occupation. Of course, part of the irony lies in the fact that, like Americans in their relationship to Mexico, the Israelis simultaneously want to keep Palestinians out, while also exploiting their labour. *Traffic* further expounds on this dichotomy by focusing on how the war on illegal drugs is undermined by the high demand for drugs and financial greed of citizens within our own country.

The third chapter focuses on exceptional spaces, those places governed by what philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers to as a once temporary, now permanent, suspension of the rule of law in the face of perceived threats to the state. Through the films *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), *The Siege* (Edward Zwick, 1998), and *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), the authors examine

the role cinema plays in exposing spaces designed to be hidden from view, such as the ever-present high-tech security monitoring of public space, the use of black sites, and extraordinary rendition whereby disappeared prisoners are transferred from country to country free from legal extradition and oversight. These films also examine the manner in which certain types of people are singled out for dehumanising treatment by virtue of their perceived foreignness, as well as the highly gendered and racialised nature of politics, both in practice and in representational form (47).

The fourth chapter examines distant others and the role the process of othering plays in the construction and potential reconstruction of Western identities, including the racialisation of the enemy and technological thinking. Focusing on *Nicija zemlja* (*No Man's Land*, Danis Tanovic, 2001), *Tears of the Sun* (Antoine Fuqua, 2003), and *Kurtlar Vadisi–Irak* (*Valley of the Wolves–Iraq*, Serdar Akar, 2006), Carter and Dodds examine the ways in which film gives voice to the on-the-ground experiences of individuals who fall between "official cartographies of conflict" (67). *No Man's Land*, in particular, recognises the extent to which "popular media are crucial to the way in which conflict is managed and represented" while also recognising their "potential to disrupt hegemonic scripts" (69). *Tears of the Sun* is seen not only as a commentary on the West's failure to effectively intervene during the humanitarian disasters of Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s, but also on the US's desire to be seen as liberators by "needy, pitiful and feminised Global South subjects needing and willing to be rescued" (74). At the same time, what perhaps rehabilitates this wishful narrative is its omni-present backdrop of oil and thus Western oil interests and their relationship to human rights violations and environmental degradation, which problematises such humanitarian intervention and implicates the rescuers, a fact not commented on by the authors. They conclude by examining the concept of homeland through *Dirty Pretty Things* (Stephen Frears, 2002), *Das Leben der anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), and *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1990) and the manner in which traditional notions of feminised, domestic spaces free from politics are undermined by surveillance technology and discrimination toward, and exploitation of, immigrants, which transform them into enemies within and, thus, literal embodiments of the border. *Sous les bombes* (*Under the Bombs*, Philippe Aractingi, 2007) offers another vision whereby disparate individuals can find ways to cooperate, despite living amidst competing interests in the strategically important war-torn Lebanon.

Films are constitutive of international politics because they help "re-populate and reclaim the disembodied tendencies within realist and idealist studies of international politics", both of which emphasise a kind of epiphenomenalism in which the international order is seen as existing outside the intentions of individual actors (4). This is not merely of interest to academics. After the 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, a number of films emerged depicting a growing anxiety over our global interconnectedness. Hyperlink multinarrative films such as Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006), *Contagion* (Stephen Soderbergh, 2011), and *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005), amongst others, all depict a sense of powerlessness in the midst of complex global forces. Moreover, each reflects the widespread fascination with the so-called butterfly effect whereby small, localised action within a complex system causes large, unforeseen effects elsewhere, thereby linking our individual behaviour to potentially catastrophic effects for others on the other side of the globe. The interpretation of customary international law depends, in part, upon international tribunals reviewing "the teachings of the most highly qualified publicists" ("Statute") and "the writings of scholars" ("Restatement") in order to ascertain what states are voluntarily

doing out of a sense of obligation so as to inductively determine what the current governing legal customs are. In similar fashion, concepts such as the nation state and its borders depend upon written and visual media, as well as the mundane beliefs, attitudes, and practices of ordinary people who consume and create that media.

As any black-ops intelligence expert would likely concede, there is an aesthetic-emotive aspect to politics that cannot be reduced to rational actor paradigms. By helping to constitute our relationship to global politics, films not only render visible the hidden, they also "challenge, critique, and ridicule" (12) international political practices. With this comes the possibility of "dismantl[ing] binaries between domestic and international affairs" (59), thereby giving us the tools to understand and overcome Western indifference toward the policies undertaken in our names and thus, one would hope, to reimagine and reshape them in ways that would add to, rather than detract from, human flourishing both at home and abroad. Carter and Dodds make a meaningful contribution to that dialogue and, in doing so, underscore the importance of film to wider discussions about the ontology of the political world around us.

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